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The Impacts for Social Workers of Providing Social Work Services in Rural Northeastern Ontario  
Communities

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the personal and professional experiences of rural social workers. This is a qualitative study with a constructivist grounded theory lens. This study utilizes a sample of four participants. The participants work in the social work field and live in northeastern Ontario rural communities. Data was collected by audio-taped individual semi-structured interviews and subsequent member checking. The question explored is, how do rural social workers experience rural social work practice? Results of the study reveal that rural social workers experience both challenges and strengths within their professional and personal lives. Three themes related to rural social work emerged through data analysis. The themes include rural social workers as unprepared for their work environments, rural social workers as having multiple roles and the strengths and challenges rural social workers face. This research provides insight into the experiences of rural social workers and recommendations for how to better prepare rural social workers. The study further provides information related to implications for social work education, social work practice and implications for future research. The implications for social work education include a recommendation that social work students be provided with a broad range of training in all areas, including rural social work practice. The implications for social work practice include that we must encourage and maintain social workers who demonstrate an interest in rural social work. Lastly, future research could be done regarding supervision and rural social workers.

### Résumé

Cette étude a pour but d'examiner l'expérience personnelle et professionnelle des travailleuses sociales en milieu rural. Il s'agit d'une étude qualitative effectuée sous l'angle de la méthodologie de la théorisation enracinée (MTE) d'orientation constructiviste. Un échantillon de quatre participantes a été utilisé pour cette étude. Ces participantes travaillent dans le domaine du travail social et vivent dans des communautés rurales du nord-est ontarien. Les données furent recueillies à partir d'interviews semi-structurés obtenus sur bande audio, suivi d'une vérification et rétroaction des participants. La question explorée est la suivante : comment les travailleuses sociales vivent-ils la pratique du travail social en milieu rural ? Les résultats de l'étude révèlent que les travailleuses sociales en milieu rural rencontrent des défis et démontrent des forces tant sur le plan professionnel que personnel. De cette analyse de données, trois thèmes rattachés au travail social en milieu rural ont ressorti : les travailleuses sociales en milieu rural ne sont pas préparés à leur milieu de travail; les travailleuses sociales en milieu rural ont des rôles multiples; ainsi que les forces et les défis auxquels ils font face. Cette étude fournit un éclaircissement sur l'expérience des travailleuses sociales ainsi que des recommandations pour mieux les préparer au travail social en milieu rural. De plus, cette étude procure des renseignements ayant des portées sur les études en travail social, sur la pratique de ce travail, ainsi que pour de plus amples recherches dans le domaine. En ce qui touche aux études en travail social on retrouve la recommandation que les étudiantes et étudiants en travail social obtiennent un large éventail de formation dans tous les domaines, incluant la pratique du travail social en milieu rural. Quant à la pratique du travail social on note qu'on doit encourager et soutenir les travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux qui montrent de l'intérêt envers le travail social en milieu rural. Enfin, de plus amples recherches pourraient être effectuées dans le domaine de la supervision du travail social en milieu rural.

**Page of Acknowledgements**

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### **Introduction**

The field of social work is varied and encompasses many aspects of practice. An individual working within the social work field may work in the domains of mental health and addictions, within the legal field, community work, health care, education settings, and child welfare for example. For this reason, social work is not simply defined. For the context of this research, social work is defined as promoting social and personal change, providing guided support, eradicating structural inequalities, and advocating for resources and services for those in need (Lundy, 2011). Social workers, together with families, individuals, communities and organizations, work to attend to challenging situations. Often, these challenges are tackled through: assessment of needs, evaluation of current circumstances and well-being, diagnosis if appropriate, treatment, and advocacy, counselling and case management.

The challenges that individuals face will vary, based on their life circumstances, their support systems, their familial system, their health and their geographical location. Therefore, it is important to discuss urban and rural social work practices, since one's location will have significant impacts on access to services.

It is imperative to conceptualize the geographical definitions of urban and rural areas. An urban area is defined as having "a population of at least 1,000 and a population density of 400 persons or more per square kilometer" (Statistics Canada, 2015). It is important to consider that many communities that might meet the definitional criteria as small urban centers really are rural because the populations are thinly dispersed and the range of services available are limited or nonexistent in these geographical regions. A rural area is further defined as "all territory lying outside of population centers" (Statistics Canada, 2015), also known as urban areas. Rural areas also include small towns and villages and are areas that "remain after the delineation" (Statistics Canada, 2015) of urban areas. Also, within the Canadian context a rural area can also include any area where the second character of the postal code is 0 (du Plessis, Beshiri, & Bollman, 2001). Rural communities most often do not have many chain stores or restaurants such as McDonald's, Tim Hortons or Walmart. Rural communities



may only have two primary schools, French Catholic and English public to choose from, one arena and only a select few extra-curricular activities.

Northern Ontario is defined as all areas situated North of and including Parry Sound and Nipissing. Northern Ontario includes 10 districts (Northern Ontario Districts, 2014). The borders of Northeastern Ontario are as follows: to the east it borders the province of Quebec, all the way to James Bay in the north, Missanabie towards the West and Lake Huron towards the south. Northeastern Ontario includes the Algoma, Sudbury, Cochrane, Timiskaming, Nipissing and Manitoulin districts (see Appendix B for a map of the region).

Since social work is practiced in a variety of different settings, the approach, resources and the overall effect of providing services will depend, to some extent, upon the individual social worker's geographical location of employment. For example, an individual providing social work services in a large urban centre, such as Toronto, Ontario has access to multiple resources, advocacy avenues and programs geared specifically to the individual's needs. Comparatively, an individual providing social work services on the isolated Aboriginal reserve of Fort Albany, Ontario that consists of one social services department, which includes, Ontario Works and child welfare services and health services (211north, 2018).

When discussing urban and rural social work practice it is vital to discuss the impacts of weather conditions. Winter weather conditions may impede access to and within communities. For example, if a social worker travels to a community to offer services and the weather conditions make travel impossible, the service will not be available regardless of need for such service. Furthermore, many rural communities in northeastern Ontario are distanced anywhere from 30 minutes to several hours driving distance from an urban centre, making it difficult to access social services. The distance may mean that no service or only one service is available in certain communities. It is, therefore, important to study social work practice in rural areas in northeastern Ontario and to discover how prepared social workers are to work in rural communities.

In terms of the definitions given above, many regions across Ontario are comprised of rural communities, yet most social workers in Ontario are not trained to work in these locations, with their unique challenges and opportunities. A thorough online research of all Ontario universities providing Bachelor of Social Work programs was completed. This research entailed looking at each program's requirements and course selections. Each course offered, whether it be a required or an elective course, was analyzed for each Bachelor of Social Work program. It was found that very few programs offer courses specific to rural or northern social work practice. The only Bachelor of Social Work program providing courses specific to social work practice in rural or northern communities can be found at Algoma University. One course specifically focuses on social work in rural and northern areas and nine others provide a northern focus (Algoma University, 2015). This is important to explore, since some new BSW graduates may relocate to rural communities to gain employment. Equally as important to explore is how individuals working in direct social work practice relocating to rural communities adapt to these environments.

Urban versus rural social work practice is the topic of much research. There are many scholarly journals and educational textbooks on rural social work and rural social work practice. However, there is a gap in what rural social workers express they would have liked to have been exposed to during their education, and what is being taught in the current Canadian social work curriculum. Some studies explore how curriculums should be altered. Examples can be found in a study by Carson, Schoo & Berggren (2015), which suggest focusing on individuals who have a rural background and providing more rural exposure within the education programs. A study of 115 social work students, conducted by Philips, Quinn & Heitkamp (2010) reveals that social work curriculums should have rural social workers coming to speak to students, as well as required rural social work courses. In addition, this study also suggests more exposure to rural areas through field trips, volunteer or placement opportunities.

**Purpose**

This study explores the experiences of rural social workers in northeastern Ontario. The research explores how rural communities present different challenges than in urban areas; and explores ways social work curriculum, field placement coordinators and agencies can provide legitimate practice skills for this environment. Moreover, it is important to explore the stories reflecting the unique issues experienced in rural social work, as demonstrated through personal events that rural social workers in northeastern Ontario have experienced in their everyday lives. This may also be identified in the success stories and novel coping skills developed by individuals currently working in these areas.

This thesis is separated into five chapters. Chapter one provides an overview and rationale for the study. Chapter two explores the relevant literature as it is related to rural social work. The third chapter explores the methodology, including the research question, rationale, personal statement and approach, target population and sampling methods, data collection procedure and method of analysis. Chapter four discusses the results from the study; and lastly, chapter five outlines the discussion, conclusion, limitations of the study and implications for social work education, social work practice and future research.

### **Literature Review**

A literature review of major themes related to social work practice in rural areas reveals that there are significant differences between rural and urban social work practice. Based on the literature, rural social workers are often faced with a lack of resources and are faced with issues regarding dual relationships. It also suggests that there is an impact on the personal and professional lives of social workers practicing in rural communities. Furthermore, there are many positive attributes of rural social work practice upon which future directions for rural social work may be built.

### **The Urban / Rural Social Work Practice Dichotomy**

Social work practice can vary based upon type of employment, or geographical location. The literature discusses many issues in how rural and urban social work are distinct practice settings (Brownlee et al., 2010; Delaney et al., 1997; Graham et al., 2008; Graham et al., 2011; Skehill, 2003; & Zapf, 1993). The geographical location of social work practice will be affected by the current political climate and globalization. Globalization has provided the world with opportunities to bring people together internationally, using the real world and the virtual worlds (Dominelli, 2010). Globalization through industrialization and capitalist growth has also created political, financial and environmental crises which has a direct impact on social work practice. These crises directly affect people since services and program are cut or reduced and prices of commodities continue to rise. Social work practice is affected by globalization as social workers are responding to more people with less available funding and have a greater demand placed on them (Dominelli, 2010). This may be further emphasized in rural communities where there are already a reduced number of service options and fewer social work practitioners.

Delaney, Brownlee, Sellick and Tranter (1997) indicate that northern Ontario communities have their own unique challenges. However, their solutions, resources and opportunities are often dictated by the political ideologies of power brokers in the southern, urbanized regions of the province. The

literature indicates that social workers trained in southern Ontario universities may be ill prepared to deal with the complexities of northern rural social work, where there is a possibility of culture shock.

Since social work ethics and practice may be influenced by individuals in urban regions with urban perspectives, they may not consider the unique circumstances of rural communities. The northern worker may encounter ethical issues at a higher rate than individuals in urban areas, by living near potential clients. This places a high demand on the rural worker to address these ethical issues as they are experiencing them first hand. Since available resources differ from urban to rural, the way ethical issues are remedied may also differ. For example, if an ethical issue were to arise, such as a conflict of interest, an urban social worker could simply transfer the client within the same organization or refer them to another agency. However, in a rural community there may only be one service available and, therefore, the client transfer may not be possible. The rural social worker may choose to continue to work with the individual regardless of the conflict or simply deny them services.

Zapf (1993), whose work continues to be cited by recent literature (Cheers et al, 2005; Graham et al., 2007; Graham & Shier., 2010; Graham et al., 2011; Wendt et al., 2012), suggests that it is important to “expand the accepted urban–rural dichotomy by recognizing remote northern regions as unique practice settings” (p.694). Moreover, recruitment and maintaining social workers in these areas can pose a challenge, especially if the individual does not have an overall positive subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is the level of satisfaction by which an individual evaluates their life. Subjective well-being has been shown to be negatively affected by emotions, job satisfaction and self-esteem. One’s subjective well-being is directly affected by job satisfaction and shares a link between burnout and workplace turnover (Shier & Graham, 2010).

Issues with subjective well-being are not confined to rural locations but the lack of resources and/or isolation can exacerbate the situation. The challenges and unique circumstances faced by those in rural northern locations are not effectively explained by theories and practices used in social work (Graham et al., 2011). Therefore, there must be an effort to ensure that the social and political

stakeholders of the north direct the needs of the rural north, rather than mirror the needs of the south.

Another of the most challenging issues for social workers in northern rural communities is the potential of dual relationships.

### **Dual Relationships**

Dual relationships are any other relationships that a social worker holds with a service user that is separate from the therapeutic relationship. This includes a friendship, or other professional interactions with a client outside of the office. These dual relationships could be deemed a conflict of interest by the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers if it is determined that the social worker has exploited the relationship for their own benefit, since social workers maintain a professional position of authority over these individuals (Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, 2008). Dual relationships can also be defined as having a relationship outside of the therapeutic client-counsellor relationship. It has been thought that dual relationships include the risk of “coercion, exploitation and other misuses of power” (Halverson & Brownlee, 2010, p.248). For this reason, dual relationships must be extensively contemplated.

However, non-sexual dual relationships in rural northern communities are a reality and are often unavoidable. Dual relationships can occur when social workers and clients have mutual family or friends, they have unexpected meetings in the community, as an inevitable outcome due to the lack of other service options, the potential of being involved in the same extracurricular activities or frequenting similar businesses and other facilities (Brownlee et al., 2010). These are realities that rural social workers face every day. In terms of dual relationships, certain boundaries may become an issue. For example, a client might tell another that they seek services from the social worker or clients will approach a social worker in public to discuss scheduling issues.

The literature suggests that dual relationships are a matter of fact in rural communities (Delaney, Brownlee, Sellick & Tranter, 1997). One might have to shop at a client’s store, or children may participate in sports together. It is important to note that these dual relationships are not only seen

as unavoidable, but also accepted in these rural communities. The literature mentions that perhaps clients should be the ones to determine if the dual relationship is an issue for them (Delaney et al., 1997), or in fact that the problem to be addressed is how to manage dual relationships rather than avoid them. A solution may include an open dialogue with clients regarding out of office contacts (Gonyea, Wright & Earl-Kulkosly, 2014).

Completely avoiding clients in a rural northern community is not a realistic option for rural social workers. Furthermore, dual relationships may pose a dilemma for practitioners since studies demonstrate that social workers believe they were ill prepared in their training on how to manage dual relationships (Halverson & Brown, 2010). In addition, confidentiality may become an issue because many rural communities are small and, therefore, individuals may see clients leaving the office, or recognize their vehicle or clients may see each other in the waiting room (Gonyea et al., 2014).

Brownlee (1996) states that not all dual relationships need to be deemed unethical, and in a northern context doing so is unrealistic and restrictive. Within the northern geographical context dual relationships are often seen as having positive effects on the therapeutic relationship, as well as potentially offering positive effects of modelling constructive behaviours by using when social workers use their own personal lived experiences as a teaching tool for service users (Graham, Shier & Browlee, 2014). Therefore, when such social workers are involved in dual relationships they make them work and do so in a way which improves the lived experiences of clients.

In addition, studies done regarding rural health care are also applicable to rural social work practice as they are both professions in the helping field. A study conducted by Moules, MacLeod, Thirsk and Hanlon (2010) interviewed 32 families, 25 public health nurses and three lay home visitors and found that the individuals in the helping field need to be known by the service user to develop trust. We all enter relationships and courtesies are integral to relationship development. These indicate respect for one another. The public health nurses in this study acknowledged that work occurred outside of normal business hours at the local grocery store, churches and the post office where

questions and advice are asked, and answers are provided. Standard practice rules in urban areas can get in the way of creating and maintaining good professional relationships with clients in rural areas.

### **Resources and Technology**

A common theme indicated throughout the literature is a lack of resources in northern rural communities (Brownlee et al., 2010; Jeffery et al, 2005). These include resources for direct social work practice, as well as professional resources. Resources for direct social work practice include sufficient time for all clients or educational tools to work with clients, whereas professional resources include the ability to access continuing education or access to networking opportunities.

Graham et al. (2011) explain that social workers practicing in rural communities often encounter funding shortages, large workloads, and limited support from peers and clinical supervisors. This creates a decrease in professional networks, which can lead to a sense of isolation for the rural social worker. Urban centres typically have a multitude of programs such as government agencies, non-profit agencies, community outreach, food banks or soup kitchens; specific services for men and women, shelters and transitional housing, to mention a few. However, in a rural community, it would not be unusual to have only a few essential social work agencies. This then challenges the local rural social workers to take on more responsibility so that individuals do not go without services.

The isolation of workers leads to limited opportunities for professional supervision with experienced workers, networking and support from local colleagues, as well as limited access to professional education or training (Brownlee, Graham, Doucette, Hotson and Halverson, 2010). As well, there seems to be a requirement to assume more wide-ranging expertise than in an urban setting where a more diverse range of services exist.

The use of technology in direct social work practice has been an important aspect for rural social work. This technology is also known as information and communication technologies (ICT) (Wasko, 2005), telecommunication or more specifically tele-counselling. There are two main forms of technology used, including “store-and-forward technology such as emails or websites and real-time



videoconferencing” (Wasko, 2005, p.47). These technologies allow social workers to provide individual counselling, groups support services, family or couples counselling, advocacy and community engagement (Wasko, 2005). The use of information and communication technologies has had both negative and positive outcomes in rural communities. The negative aspects include ethical issues, such as the duty-to-warn regarding cases of abuse, confidentiality and technical difficulties during sessions (Mishna, Tufford, Cook & Bogo, 2013). In terms of reporting, laws may vary between provinces, which means social workers must ensure that informed consent is obtained prior to the commencement of services. As well, confidentiality issues include, for example, emails being intercepted by client’s family, friends or others (Mishna et al., 2013). In these circumstances confidentiality is now shared between the service user and social worker because of the dual locations, while historically the burden of confidentiality would lie solely with the social worker. Furthermore, Wasko (2005) mentions potential issues with technology security, therefore insuring that connections are secure and cannot be accessed by others. Other issues pertaining to liability and accountability, software incompatibilities, and lack of reliable connections, are all important aspects to consider when using technology to deliver social services. For example, should problems occur with technology, who is liable / accountable? Is it the individual providing the internet service or the social worker? Also, depending on one’s location the technology may differ in terms of speed, quality of the images and “the extent to which the medium is visually adequate for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes” (Wasko, 2005, p. 47), including transmission delays and gaps in data at critical moments. Although many of these issues may have been mitigated with advancement in technology it is not completely eradicated. Also important to consider is the ability for more senior clients to work with technology; the potential challenges of building therapeutic rapport via telephone, email or through video; challenges in picking up nonverbal cues that may be more apparent during face-to-face consultations.

Perron, Taylor, Glass and Margerum-Leys (2010) address, through a review of social work courses, that information and communications technologies are not present in the curriculum, other

than email communications. Therefore, social work students are not being prepared for the use of ICT that are integral in today's workforce and will continue to become more important. The current social work curriculum focuses on in-person relationships, while not educating on the roles of telecommunication therapeutic relationships. It is also important to consider the option that not all practitioners or service users would be inclined, or comfortable to use technology such as telemedicine communication or telephone counselling.

However, on the positive side, when these information and communication technologies are available they can help alleviate professional isolation and can provide specialized services for clients such as psychiatry and online education sessions for social workers. Telecommunications have helped to lessen professional isolation by providing social workers with expertise that goes beyond their own professional abilities (Brownlee et al., 2010). Brownlee et al., (2010) further indicate that internet access has helped to alleviate pressure for sole social workers, to help gain knowledge and provide necessary information.

Other components of technology include cyber or online counselling and the use of virtual worlds within social work. Cyber counselling is relatively recent and there is little literature available regarding outcomes of cyber counselling. Research thus far seems to indicate that cyber counselling would be ideal for youth as they tend to be tech savvy and comfortable using this technology (Mishna, Tufford, Cook & Bogo, 2013). They explain the benefits of cyber counselling include greater accessibility, and that it provides a greater sense of safety for those who afraid of seeking counselling in person because of issues related to anxiety, stigma and because of the anonymity it provides when discussing intimate issues.

Virtual worlds are a place where individuals can create a profile or "avatar" in order to interact in a virtual world / environment with other people from across the world. Virtual worlds are not only for gaming but also provide an environment where an individual may have social interactions, education and for some, romance (Anstadt, Burnette & Bradley, 2011). Although there has been much

research on telecommunication technologies and social work practice, there is little research in this domain to identify if this could be used as an effective tool for social work practice in virtual platforms.

Although rural social work practice is already partly operating through information and communication technologies, there should be an increase not only in its use, but also how it is used. As technology continues to advance, so will the options for rural social workers’.

### **Effects on Rural Social Workers Personal and Professional Lives**

The literature speaks to the fact that rural social workers must learn to manage their personal lives around their professional lives (Graham et al., 2014). Because of the nature of rural communities, social workers’ privacy can easily become compromised. Their lives are more open and transparent to their clients. This transparency influences the rural social worker to alter their behaviours, going as far as limiting their outings in the community, which in turn can affect how they work with the clients (Graham et al., 2014). Graham and colleagues (2014) suggest rural social workers live in a sort of glass fishbowl where their every behaviour, movement and their personal and professional lives are scrutinized and observed. There is a sense of having to mould one’s behaviour to ensure congruence in how they live their lives with the expectations or suggestions they make to clients.

In addition, it is suggested that rural social workers are often “expected to operate on the boundaries of their professional competency” (Brownlee, Graham, Doucette, Hotson, Halverson, 2010, p.624). This then puts pressure on the practitioner; and as a result they may go against their ethical mandate, more specifically the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, 2008). For example, the Code articulates that a social worker is to be aware of their scope of practice and limit their practice accordingly; however, in a rural community one might not have a choice but to work outside of their scope of practice. Rural social workers may find themselves adjusting and bending rules. For example, the rural practitioner may have a conflict of interest with a client, such as having two family members as clients, but in the interest of not denying services they adjust to provide the service. Therefore, social workers are

working outside of their scope of practice which is contrary to the Code of Ethics since it could pose a risk to the individual, by not being knowledgeable regarding best practices for certain issues. To function within the realm of high visibility, rural social workers must be self-directed and creative in their approaches with clients (Mason, 2011).

### **Positive Aspects of Rural Social Work Practice**

It is also important to acknowledge and emphasize that rural social workers often find ways to be flexible, creative, and unique in their approach (Graham, Brownlee, Shier & Doucette, 2008). The literature suggests that rural social workers claim that the out of office connections with clients provide not only complications, but also advantages (Riebschleger, 2007). Graham, Shier and Brownlee (2014) establish that although roles as professional and community member are often intertwined, the needs of clients are supported both through formal and informal social work practice. Formal practice may include counselling sessions or group programming, while informal interactions may include bumping into clients within the community and simultaneously demonstrating a positive role model. Social workers within these rural communities have a positive effect on the community as a whole by providing a service that may not have been available beforehand.

Other advantages of rural life include a slow pace to life, decreased crime rates, reduced pollution and traffic and many outdoor recreational activities (Fitfield & Oliver, 2016). A study by Wendt, Schiller, Cheers, Francis and Lonne (2011) further describes what is needed for rural social workers to succeed in the short-term and for long-term placements in rural communities. They discuss that rural social workers must be resilient, have positive emotions, be optimistic and have internal meaning. Most particularly, optimism includes “positive, favourable, relatively stable expectations for future outcomes or, in other words, ‘making the best of whatever is encountered’” (p.197). This indicates that rural social work may not be for everyone; however, it can provide such a rich experience.

There are several theories and/or practice approaches that could work well in a rural environment; for example, psychosocial rehabilitation, which is also known as psychiatric rehabilitation or PR. Psychosocial rehabilitation promotes health, well-being and overall functioning in an individual and enables the individual to be an active participant in their recovery (Gundmundsdottir & Thome, 2014). The primary focus is on a psychosocial approach, thereby encompassing many aspects, including the service users' living situation, learning capacities, activities, vocation, leisure and social contact, and emphasizing and promoting learning and coping skills (Wel, Felling & Persoon, 2003). These services are client-centered and emphasize the advantages of innovation and experimentation when working with clients (Bond, Evans, Salyers, Williams & Kim, 2000). In the Canadian context psychosocial rehabilitation aims to recognize culture and diversity, facilitate partnerships with other important members identified by the service user, exercise full integration into community and aiding with the growth of personal support networks (PSRRPS Canada, 2014). Therefore, psychosocial rehabilitation is flexible in its approach with service users and would work well in a rural context.

Furthermore, a study by Bourke, Humphreys, Wakerman and Taylor (2010) suggests moving away from looking at rural areas from a deficit view. There is a great deal of research on the prominent problems and shortcomings in rural areas; however, it is imperative to look at rural system strengths. A deficit view of rural locations provides a narrow lens and focuses primarily on problems. It focuses on what is lacking and systematically ignores the positive attributes that could attract individuals to rural locations. Therefore, rural practice services can also benefit from a strengths-based approach to empower locals, encourage community participation and work off strengths and be better able to address areas in need of change.

Lastly, a generalist approach to social work practice can provide incredibly rewarding work and provides equal levels of professional satisfaction as one would find in an urban center. As well, rural social work provides advantages for career opportunities that may not be obtained in urban setting; for

example, autonomy, variety related to generalist work, less competition for employment and the ability to see direct outcomes within one's local community (Fitfield & Oliver, 2016). Therefore, rural communities can provide greater career development as individuals may be exposed to a variety of new experiences.

### **The Future of Rural Social Work Practice**

Literature regarding the future direction of rural social work is varied and provides many suggestions. Goodwin, MacNaughton-Doucet and Allan (2016) suggest the approach of interpersonal mental health collaborative practice (IMHCP) as it allows for an inter-professional team. The IMHCP approach uses all available resources to provide maximum benefits. In addition, IMHCP has been related to better effectiveness for a variety of health care services, it is cost-effective, has a positive influence on job satisfaction and retention of employees, better patient care, improved professional development opportunities, which in turn alleviate professional isolation.

Graham et al., (2014) advocate for a model or concept based on localization. The idea of localization is to adapt and develop social work knowledge and practice based on each community's unique and specific needs. Furthermore, in terms of the OCSWSSW there has been a shift in research which suggests that "social work practice guidelines...be adapted to meet the needs of particular communities" (Graham et al., 2014, p.115).

Graham et al., (2008) advocates for a concept based in social development theory. Social development theory would work to create a framework specific for social work practice in northern rural communities. This framework would focus primarily on shifting how social workers behave when interacting with service users. It identifies northern rural communities as being unique and in need of its own practice model by which all rural social work practitioners would be trained. The goal would be to create a model that all northern rural social work practitioners to put into practice.

The future of rural social work practice may be informed by community development, which promotes self-advocacy for communities trying to obtain the resources that they need to thrive (Graham

et al., 2008). The process of community development / advocacy is itself beneficial. Apart from the material resources that these processes may attract, communities become stronger and more cohesive by the exercise of working together on shared goals. The future of rural social work practice will likely focus on the rural social worker as being a part of a larger team or system, and having rural social worker work closely together with other professionals and communities themselves to establish the best care possible for rural community members.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Question**

The question this study explores is how do social workers experience rural social work practice? This includes: a) how their lives are negatively or positively affected by living and working in a rural community; b) how they manage out of office encounters with clients; and c) how can social workers be better prepared for working in a rural community?

### **Rationale**

A study that explores the lived experiences of northeastern Ontario rural social workers could shed light on how rural social workers experience their everyday personal and professional lives. It is important to focus on how they manage ethical issues, discuss whether they experience a lack of resources and offer a discourse on the positive qualities they experience in rural social work practice. A qualitative study seeking out those who have experienced rural social work is imperative to allow their stories to be heard and share their experiences and wisdom of adaptation to rural social work practice.

### **Methodology**

Given that there is limited research on experiences of rural social workers in the northeastern Ontario region, a qualitative research method, focused specifically on using constructivist grounded theory was chosen for this study. Grounded theory was developed by Corbin and Strauss in the 1960s (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and focuses on a structured research method of “a single process or core category” (Creswell, 2013, p.87). Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that aims to generate theory from the analysis of collected data. Through grounded theory methods, an explanation or theory is generated based on a “process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of...participants” (Creswell, 2013, p.83). Grounded theory implies a connection between concepts and focuses on how individuals relate to the topic being studied. Grounded theory also fosters an exploration of ideas by using analytic writing early in the research process (Charmaz, 2006). A variety of data is encouraged in grounded theory as it can provide different views and perspectives that the



researcher can pull from the varied data to strengthen the emerging grounded theory. This research utilizes two modes of data, including: interviews and member checking.

Grounded theory analyzes data and allows themes to emerge rather than fit the data into categories that are pre-determined. Urquhart mentions “that we should seek to see what the data indicates, rather than shoehorn it into a theory that already exists” (2013, p.7); and this leads to greater possibilities of discovering something new. Therefore, grounded theory has the potential to play a significant role in terms of theory development in all disciplines.

For this study a constructivist grounded theory method was used, which was developed by Charmaz (2006). The social constructivist perspective on grounded theory was chosen for this research since it considers many realities and complexities of views and actions. Additionally, constructivist grounded theory allows for flexibility and does not require the researcher to leave one’s theoretical preconceptions or judgements to be open to what will emerge from the data, as is the traditional grounded theory method (Urquhart, 2013). Charmaz (2006) does not minimize the role of researcher since we are all part of the processes and the world that is being studied. Not setting aside the researcher’s perspective is important to consider since the researcher “makes decisions about the categories throughout the process, brings questions to the data, and advances personal values, experiences, and priorities” (Creswell, 2013, p.88) in the analysis phase. Researchers are part of the world being studied and the data being collected, and therefore the theories grounded in the data are constructed by the researcher’s past and present association and relations with people, perceptions and research practices (Charmaz, 2006).

Another important characteristic of grounded theory is constant comparison. It is imperative that researchers constantly compare portions of data: for example, different interviews, or comparing new data to emerging categories. Constant comparison allows the researcher to identify if the data adds to an existing theme or points to something new (Urquhart, 2013). With comparison the theory or research will continuously evolve and allow for constructs to be constantly reviewed until saturation

has been reached. Saturation is reached when there are no new themes or data that emerges from reading and re-reading all the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Much attention in social work research has been grounded in determining best practices and measuring outcomes of interventions. It is imperative that social work interventions and assessments have a well-built theoretical base (Okta, 2012). Furthermore, it is important that social work theories be applicable to social work practice. Much of social work theory comes from social sciences and thus it is not always transferable to practice situations in social work, since some theories “are too abstract, while others are problematic because they are based on models of human behaviour that differ from the social work focus on person in environment” (Okta, 2012, p.4). Constructivist grounded theory is an optimal method for this research since grounded theory informs theory directly derived from real-world people and situations. This creates the possibility of developing theories or interpretations that may have the capacity to change with findings of new research. Grounded theory can be used to expand interventions based on theory that has been or can be tested in social work practice settings. Therefore, grounded theory is ideal for this research study because it aims to develop theory that can be applied first hand by social workers in the rural northeastern Ontario regions. This study used grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), while interviewing northeastern Ontario rural social workers to explore their lived experiences and construct a theory on how to better prepare, educate and support northern social workers in their transition from school and urban areas to rural locations.

### **Target Population and Sampling Methods**

The target population for this study was social workers or individuals working in direct social work practice, and who were presently living and working in rural communities within northeastern Ontario for a minimum of six months. The possible areas to sample from included towns within a 34600 square kilometer subsection of northeastern Ontario

Purposeful sample selection was chosen for this study. Purposive sampling entails selecting participants based on predetermined criteria that are directly relevant to the research question

(Creswell, 2014). Therefore, purposive sampling was best to ensure the sample includes individuals working in direct social work practice.

A preliminary web-based search was undertaken on Connex Ontario for mental health organizations in the northeastern Ontario region. Some organizations were contacted directly by telephone while others received an email including the Research Information Letter (see appendix E) and the Informed Consent Statement (see appendix F). Personal contacts were also used to reach out to organizations. Some participants were recruited by telephone directly while others received the email with the research information and contacted this researcher. Those participants who demonstrated an interest in the study were screened via telephone or email for two main criteria: they were asked if they were working in direct social work practice, and whether they had been living and working in their northeastern Ontario rural community for a minimum of six months. Those who met these basic criteria were invited to participate in the research by way of face-to-face interview.

### **Data Collection**

Participants who agreed to participate in a face-to-face interview were asked to review the Informed Consent Statement (see appendix F) and asked if they had any questions or concerns about the proposed study. A time and location for the initial interview was discussed and was collaboratively chosen between the participant and researcher. I travelled to the participants to be in the community where the participants were residing and working.

During the initial interview, the Informed Consent Statement (see appendix F) was reviewed thoroughly and participants were asked to sign to indicate their willingness to proceed with the interview. Prior to commencing the interview, I completed, along with the participant, the Interview Protocol Form (see appendix C) to gather demographic information. Once this information had been completed I began the audio-taped interview. I initially utilized the Semi-Structured Questionnaire (see appendix D) to begin each interview. Participants were interviewed for a period of approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The participants were asked to discuss both their professional and personal experiences

regarding the provision of social work services in rural northeastern Ontario communities.

Furthermore, I kept a journal to record memos regarding questions, points for further discussion and general impressions for use in potential further interviews and analysis.

A summary of the research analysis and overall findings was shared with participants via email. The participants were asked about their impressions of this information and whether they had any suggestions or anything to add. I additionally asked if participants had anything more to add in terms of the theme of commitment. This theme was further explored as it was not found to be significant in the literature review. Through the data analysis it was a very interesting aspect that I believed should be explored further. I received one response by email and another via a second short interview of 20 minutes. This second short interview was not audio-taped; however, notes were kept regarding the participant's comments. The feedback from participants was positive. The participants were also in agreement with the findings and identified with the themes.

No sampling biases were found as the study only included four participants. No major difficulties were encountered during recruitment or the interview phase, other than travel time as some communities were several hours drive away.

### **Methods of Analysis**

All research, including transcription, data analysis and note taking was completed by this researcher. Each interview was audio taped and transcribed by me in order to be immersed in the data and have an in-depth understanding of each participant. Memos were also recorded during interviews, through transcription, data analysis and member checking. The qualitative analysis described by Tutty, Rothery & Grinnell (1996), which consists of six distinct stages, was utilized. The six stages are as follows: preparing the interviews into transcript form, planning for analysis, initial or first-level coding, second-level coding, followed by interpretation / theory building and assessing the validity of the results.

All interview transcripts were read over initially, and then line by line coding followed. Initial thoughts, early themes / codes that emerged were manually written on the pages. Following this step, I wrote out each theme on another document, and then grouped similar data into broad themes / codes. These themes / codes were then re-coded again as similar or repetitive patterns emerged until approximately 10-12 themes remained. Next, I drew diagrams and created an image (see figure 2) of the depiction of these themes to narrow the items using axial coding or second-level coding to generate three main themes with sub-themes within them (see figure 1).

The themes / codes were discussed with the first reader during open and axial coding, to discuss those emerging and to allow another perspective. Once the themes had been analyzed, member checking was utilized, and the participants were made aware of the themes and asked for feedback and clarification. This approach to analysis was used as it was important that I become completely immersed in the data and the participants. I conducted all interviews and, therefore, had a more in-depth knowledge of each participant's experiences. I got to know the participants further through the recruiting phase, through telephone discussions prior to the interview and through conversations prior, during and after the interviews. The small scale of four participant interviews allowed the research to begin with open coding and going through line by line. This was determined to be the best choice for this study as I wanted to take each line into account to not miss any important details or information.

In order to assure the research methods were rigorous, I utilized several validating methods. Member checking was utilized to determine the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Each participant was contacted with the final results of the study and was given the opportunity to discuss the findings and add anything further. Additionally, a rich, thick description, including direct quotes from participants is provided in the results section. This description provides an element of shared experiences between participants and the readers and allows the findings to become more realistic. Additionally, my bias/experience is clearly indicated and set forthright in chapter three. In

constructivist grounded theory it is important for the researcher to not leave behind their bias as this experience influences the analysis of results.

### **Personal Statement and Approach**

This study is personally important for me as I, myself, have relocated from a major urban center to a small rural community for an employment opportunity, post-graduation from my Bachelor of Social Work program. I am from northeastern Ontario; however, I grew up in a city of over 40 000 in population. My experience in northeastern Ontario did not prepare me for my relocation to a rural community, as this community's population is less than 2500. Upon my relocation to a rural town I initially experienced many hardships, including major social isolation, not participating in any community events or activities, rarely going out and being extremely uncomfortable when seeing clients in public, since I had no experience or knowledge on how to manage this new environment. Over the past five years I have adapted and have learned to live a normal life in a rural community; however, I asked myself, how would I help someone else going through the same thing, and how could I have been better prepared for the complexities of living and working in a rural community?

My personal experiences have fuelled this research. My beliefs, assumptions and expectations of rural life, including what is reflected in my literature review are what supported my need to explore this further. I wanted to explore how others in my situation have felt upon initially relocating to a rural community. I wished to explore how they managed their personal and professional lives and how they excelled in an environment with fewer resources than in an urban space. I imagined that many of their experiences would be quite like mine and wondered how they had come to accept this situation and make the best of it.

As a rural social worker and a social work student my theoretical approach is that of person-in-environment (PIE). PIE is very prevalent in the social work field and is widely used. Person-in-environment is part of the ecological perspective that seeks to take into consideration and use the "individual and environmental adaptation to maximize fit among the relationships that the individual has

with [their] environment” (Simmon, 2012, p.7). Person-in-environment is an approach that considers the relationships between a person and their social environment (Kondrat, 2002). It views individuals and their greater social systems as being separate, but essential pieces that interact with one another. PIE emphasizes how to maximize relationships / transactions between individuals and their environments, which include their work environment, their community, and their social environment (Rogge & Cox, 2001). Furthermore, the PIE approach views the individual and their environment as creating “an ecosystem, consisting of the individual, all the systems with which the individual has reciprocal relationships, the wider environments in which the individual acts, and all the mutual interrelationships that occur between the individual and the various subsystems” (Weiss-Gal, I, 2008, p.65).

I believe this approach is both appropriate as a rural social worker when working with people, and as a person living and working in a rural community. The rural social worker is an individual in relation and interacting with their environments, which include their community, their social lives or their relationships with clients. For this reason, it is important to consider the rural social worker as integrated into these systems and to understand they cannot be separated, but these relationships can change and evolve to enhance the well-being of a person. Therefore, a rural social worker becomes a part of their environment in a rural community and is affected by all social systems. Knowing that we are all connected and affect one another is important in how we teach rural social workers to practice in their communities, and how they choose to interact with their environments.

## **Results**

The following results are based on data obtained from four interview participants. Interview protocol forms providing demographic and education information, audio recordings and the transcribed interviews make up the collected data. In addition, notes and memos were recorded during data collection and analysis, including some member checking notes. Below, the results are described in three main themes, with sub-themes. The three primary themes that emerged are: initiation into social work, multiple roles and personal and professional experiences.

The participants consisted of four women living and working in northeastern Ontario rural communities. All participants were working within social work practice. The length of time in their prospective communities and in the social work field varied from six months to 30 years. Three participants obtained a bachelor's in social work, one from Algoma University and two from Lakehead University, while another completed her Master's in Counselling Psychology from Western University. The participants ages ranged from 24 to 51 and their type of employment included direct counselling, child protection and case management.

### **Initiation into Social work**

#### **Unprepared**

A main theme that emerged from the data was initiation into social work, or the first employment post-graduation; including the theme of being unprepared in relation to that initiation. All participants' first employment in the social work field was in a rural community in Northeastern Ontario. Also, most of the participants relocated from a more urban location for this employment. Some had planned to work in a rural location while others had not. Overwhelmingly the results demonstrate that participants were ill prepared, or not prepared at all for the unique circumstances of rural social work practice. As in any profession, one must often learn and put skills into practice once employed and in the real world. However, not only are many rural social workers beginning their careers, they are also now having to learn to live in a rural community where professional and personal lives intersect.



As a rural social worker, you become much more visible than in a larger urban community, therefore, professional and personal lives are intertwined since chances of meeting service users in the community are heightened. Bowles and Duncombe (2005) also acknowledge that rural locations often attract new graduates. However, these graduates end up being faced with having to do more with less, as they are given more responsibilities and fewer resources to do it. For example, rural social workers may have an extremely large case load, working with individuals with a variety of presenting issues and may be on their own in their organization.

The results further indicate that the participants' education included some courses specific to a rural context, however these courses provided little practical firsthand knowledge necessary for the requirements of rural social work practice. Green (2003) adds that many social work programs are urban focused by nature, however they do offer rural social work courses as electives, which are therefore not required courses. One participant stated, "...you can read all the material you want but until you actually feel it and go through it, I think it's very different. So, nothing prepared me for what it would be like".

Another participant mentioned,

I don't feel it prepared me much for it but I don't know if you can fully be prepared for it and at that point too...I didn't even have rural social work on the brain right. I was living in Toronto at the time; I had no intentions of leaving there. So, like rural social work was not even like in my view point at all at that point.

The research findings highlight an important point that not all participants had planned to work in a rural location. Individuals ended up working in rural locations, even though that was not their intention, and therefore it would have been useful to have training in rural/northern practice. The participants further emphasized that some had no intention of leaving where they had been living; however, due to limited employment opportunities they ended up relocating to rural communities.

It is also important to note that two participants were originally from rural communities and stated that being from a small community prepared them for some aspects of rural social work. The participants understood that there was much less privacy being a social worker in a rural community. They also knew that they would see clients out in public and that they needed to maintain a certain professional image. One participant who is from the community she works in stated,

I'm okay with it, I don't know that anybody coming from out of [a city]...I think people that come from...out of a city to come to work in [community named by participant] have a harder time adapting to that...I'm used to it.

The research suggests that some aspects of rural social work practice may be more easily adaptable to individuals who, themselves, are originally from the community they live in, or those who have experienced living in rural communities. To further emphasize this point one participant from a rural community stated, “I like the North; I'm like from the same latitude. I'm from a small town, so I love this a lot better”.

The experiences varied based on how each participant coped with being unprepared for the rural complexities, which include the interconnection of professional, personal and community lives. The research also found that the participants learned quickly that life in a rural community is different from an urban centre, and that there are certain expectations of rural social workers. These expectations include maintaining professionalism at all times, in all aspects of their lives, and that rural social workers are expected to work in an environment with reduced professional support. Most participants mentioned that they were unprepared for the complexities of both rural social work practice and rural life. One participant stated that this is what she would share with others:

Prepare that your social life is going to change...you have to limit who your relationships are with; you have to be careful of that. Umm you hold, you have to...have to maintain an image everywhere you go. Whereas in a bigger community maybe you wouldn't... you always have to

be professional in everything you do because you never know who's watching because it's so small.

### **Commitment**

Another important theme that emerges throughout this research is the idea of commitment to one's community. It is not uncommon for individuals; for example, new social work graduates, to relocate for employment opportunities to northern rural communities. Some workers will spend time in these communities, acquire experience and leave for other opportunities, rural or urban. One participant mentioned,

And that happens a lot. People go up for jobs but rarely stay it seems, which is hard on the community and hard for the centre because you have to retrain, and clients have to get used to new workers constantly.

It can be argued that individuals who have no intention to stay in the community they are in will not engage in community wellness or adapt to their present environment. One participant stated,

So I think that's a really key piece...is that if you're going to do rural social work you need to be invested in your community because otherwise, I don't think you're going to like it... I became very invested in the community and this is my community now and this is my home and I think that's an important piece too...you become invested and you know you want to work to help support the community as a whole. So that includes supporting clients and supporting other agencies.

This is also reflected by Vance (2017) who mentions that there is a need for social workers to be a part of the communities they serve and be aware of the wide range of social dynamics that exist, and to develop professional relationships with individuals and most other service providers in the community. This research study found that it is important for rural social workers to be active members in their community, rather than living with one foot out the door until the next opportunity becomes available. One participant stated,

From my experience coming from a city to a small, rural town, I believe that setting roots in my community has made a difference. I feel that small communities get accustomed to workers coming in and leaving, making it difficult for people to trust you/develop a rapport. It was certainly a theme I heard when I started my career. Because I have established a life here, set up roots and am not just doing my time and getting out, I truly care about my community and am invested in it and the outcomes and I feel this has positively impacted both my personal and professional life. Whereas, if I was here to do a one year stay and leave... perhaps I wouldn't be so invested in the outcomes and I wouldn't be allowing the time to develop relationships and partnerships, which is believe is essential to our work. I feel that being a committed community member has allowed me to foster stronger relationships not just with my clients, but with other service providers as well – therefore strengthening other working relationships. When you live in a community where you constantly see clients, colleagues and other agency providers, relationships play a very positive part of this and I feel this can make a world of difference at times.

The research demonstrates that an individual who is committed to their community will get to know the community and be able to understand and advocate for the needs of that community. The needs might include a specific service, such as the need to belong to a peer support or a more curriculum / structured group. Knowing and understanding the needs of a northern rural community are paramount for individuals working in social work as they hold power, authority and influence. Authority can be used for means of advocacy, and this can be accomplished by organizing and working collaboratively with local and other external agencies to fill the gaps in services.

The study also demonstrates an idea of caring about the outcomes to these communities and leaving it a better place. The research suggests that it's important to be involved in community events. For example, one participant mentioned that their organization has a booth every year at the local fall fair and that they participate in open houses in order to reach more people in the community.

Another aspect to commitment is temporary positions versus full-time permanent positions. Two participants had worked in their position as temporary employees. One participant mentioned that her level of commitment to her employment changed as her employment moved from temporary to permanent. She stated, “before [I thought] I don't have to worry about it, this job is coming to an end eventually, and it's not my responsibility at the end of the day, I'm just filling in for someone else”. This participant also stated, “before I was just a filler and I [thought I] would eventually leave one day”.

Another participant relocated to a northern rural community after having applied everywhere in Ontario, as that was the only employment she could secure. However, she shared that she was reluctant to stay in the community she was currently working in. She stated, “It’s the best job I've ever had. But when it comes down to it, I probably will end up leaving just because I don't have any social supports up here”.

This participant had previously mentioned that her partner and family live in southern Ontario and that her partner would not be able to find employment in the community she is currently working in. In northern rural communities the occurrence of social workers staying for a period of time to gain experience and then intending to leave is a real issue. One participant stated, “They get that a lot in the North, people will come in, they get a job for a year, then they get the experience that they need and then they leave again”.

However, the results from the research also demonstrate that if the social worker relocating has social support, such as a partner, they may be more likely to stay in the community. It could also be argued that the employer of a temporary social worker may not invest in the employee as much as permanent worker, which may also affect the level of commitment to their community.

## **Training**

Training is an integral part of any employment. It is important to receive training prior to or at the beginning of new employment, as well as continuing education. As has been mentioned, the social workers in this study were not prepared for the complexities of rural social work practice. Most noted that they did not think anything would be able to adequately prepare them other than firsthand experience. Initial training, once hired in a new position, became problematic for some, as they were not provided with some training that was integral to their employment. For example, some participants were expected to understand specific computer programs or be able to provide specialized services such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). However, these participants did not have this knowledge and were not offered training on these topics to perform expected duties.

Three of the four participants stated that they required more training opportunities than what had been offered to them. One participant had begun her employment as a maternity leave position and had completely slipped through the cracks and had not been offered very important training necessary for her position. For example, there is an eight-module new worker training that all new employees are supposed to complete, which was not offered to the participant. It was not until two years into her permanent position that it came to the attention of management that she was missing necessary training. This participant stated that she was out of the office for nearly eight weeks to fast track the training, and since she was the sole worker in the office all her clients were put on hold while she was away. This participant shared,

I had no one to bounce ideas off [of] in the office...so when I was first hired I went to [community named by participant] for a week, I shadowed two people [and] the rest of the time I sat in the office and had to read my files and then I came to [community named by participant] the next week with [my supervisor] we went out and met a couple people...and then she was gone and I was left on my own. Umm the training that I got for our...system, it was... half a day training... coming to [community named by participant] I had no one to say, hey how do I get

to my recordings, or my recordings that are due, where's the tab for that. So, everything had to be self-learnt by me and just playing around with our systems.

Another participant shared that her position was primarily working with Indigenous peoples. She mentioned that she had no training or knowledge in this area but was willing to learn. She explained, "So, I expected to get up here and get trained. And then start with clients. But it's been backwards. I've started working with clients as a mental health worker, and then we've been trying to find opportunities for [cultural training]".

The participant was also a new graduate, therefore she did not have a wide range of experience prior to beginning her employment, and thus training would have been crucial from the beginning. As previously mentioned, the research results show that three of the four participants required more initial training, however due to their rurality their options were limited. To add, another participant stated, "Sometimes there's training opportunities that come up, oh well it's a little expensive to send you so were not going to send you". This participant mentioned that being sent out of town for training has a high cost to her agency since she is in a satellite office. Her agency must pay for the training itself, travel expenses and lodging, which they do not have to pay for their staff working in their main office.

As the study demonstrates that participants felt they should have been provided more initial training, it is evident that ongoing training also became problematic for some. Participants shared that they felt their employers wished they could provide more training opportunities, however financial restrictions impeded ongoing training opportunities located out of their community.

The participants stated that technology has been a major factor in their ability to communicate with co-workers or out of town managers or supervisor. Technology has also been used for training. Technology has allowed rural communities to be less segregated than they once were. Some training options are made available through web-based seminars, such as webinars or Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN), where participants were able to connect via webcam using the internet for lunch-and-learn sessions or other training. However, the participants acknowledged that technology does not

always afford the same quality of face-to-face training or learning opportunities. For example, participants mentioned having difficulties staying engaged and focused in distance trainings. In addition, training provided via webinar or OTN did not allow for the same type of enriching team conversations/information exchange or networking with other like social workers.

## **Multiple Roles**

### **Generalists**

This research study found that northeastern Ontario rural social workers are working as “generalists” or have taken on a generalist approach. Rural social workers practice using a variety of strategies, methodologies and varied approaches and theories. A generalist approach requires rural social workers to be able to work within varied fields of practice, and at times, outside of their scope of practice. Green (2003) also mentions that a generalist approach is not only a practice that entails working across a variety of modalities; it requires the rural social worker to use concepts of interconnection, reciprocity, interdependence and mutuality. Therefore, rural social workers must acknowledge and work with the people and community as they are connected. There is mutual dependence and influence for all community members, including professionals. The participants in this research did not use the term generalists to describe themselves, but rather used the terms “jack of all trades” or dubbed themselves as “wearing many hats”. One participant stated that she was “working with grief, anger, domestic violence...anxiety, depression, sexual abuse, so there's no specialty, it's like...you are the service”.

This research found a common thread amongst all participants: practicing dual or multiple roles, having a wide range of responsibility and being expected to function and work within many types of situations. In addition, participants shared having to work with other agencies to fill the gaps for services, which at times created an enriching experience and at other times did not work out well. For example, in one community there was no longer a children’s mental health social worker, and the adult mental health organization was asked to take on the children on an interim basis. However, the social



worker mentioned that no one at the adult mental health agency has any experience, training or resources for working with children.

Paulson & Casile (2014) state that generalist social workers must often work outside of their scope of practice due to the variety of mental health issues they may face in practice and their limitations of possible outside referrals available to them. In conjunction with this one participant stated,

Me being in [community named by participant] I'm all of that, I'm a protection worker, I'm a child care worker, I do legal things, I'm an access worker so I do everything umm so it's very hard...I... go by child protection, that's just the easiest to go by... but I wear several different hats.

Often rural social workers are expected to provide services for all ages, from children to seniors, also including a full spectrum of practice including families, couples, groups and individuals. This is not a reality for all rural workers, but it is a reality for some. On participant was asked during her interview if she felt obligated to work outside of her scope of practice and she stated, “Yes and no, so like obviously I don't go beyond what I feel I'm professionally capable of doing”. In addition, another participant discussed working closely within her mandate, however when it comes to crisis walk-ins, she explained, “we do crisis work in mental health with clients [so] we do get a lot of walk-ins like that which wouldn't necessarily be in our mandate, but you try and facilitate a warm hand-off as much as you can [to other local services].”

Participants seemed to have an overwhelming desire to help service users; and as Murphy & McDonald (2004) state, if someone has a need, they find a way to address it. All participants seemed passionate about helping people in their community. This allowed them the opportunity to be quite invested with their clients, and they would go above and beyond for them.

Although many of the participants worked as generalists, it did not seem to cause many negative issues for them. The participants added that this “jack of all trades” approach allowed for a

more holistic approach to client care and truly put the importance of the therapeutic relationship at the forefront. The participants used empathy, warmth, genuineness and a therapeutic alliance to connect with clients, as well as also involving clients in their own treatment, which is also similarly discussed by Coady and Lehmann (2016). Therefore, it was identified that using a client-centered approach is essential in allowing clients to be in control through each step of their treatment. Most mentioned that they had received so much experience in a short period of time and that they have had to learn a lot on their own, which was frightening and unnerving, but at the same time enriching. In addition, many rural social workers are practicing for the first time since graduating school and this experience is all they know. Therefore, their current employment, including how day-to-day operates, is all they know; and therefore, this is their normal.

### **Travel/Transportation**

This study found that those living and working in a northeastern Ontario rural location found themselves working within a large catchment area; therefore, a small rural community is servicing several smaller surrounding communities. These communities could be hundreds of kilometres apart. The social workers are expected to travel, using their own vehicles to provide services to these outlying communities. When a participant was asked what she would like to see changed, she shared that she would request a company vehicle because she must travel so much. She also mentioned that if she were living in an urban centre she would have the luxury to rent a vehicle, however this is not available or possible in her rural community. This participant discussed the fact that she must travel long distances with her own personal vehicle, putting on kilometres and causing damage to her vehicle as some areas in the catchment area can only be accessed by unpaved roads. She even mentioned having to change flat tires on occasion. Another participant further shared,

It's crazy because you get [three communities named by participant] like three, four-hour drive to get there, to the outskirts of your district, to your area that you cover so, a lot of travelling.

And you have to use your own vehicle, so a lot of time spent on the road away from home as well, so that was another [thing that] wasn't too attractive after a while.

The participants shared that there seems to be an expectation that rural social workers will utilize their own personal vehicle for extensive travel for the organization they work for, whereas if they were working in an urban centre this would likely not be the case. Not only are rural social workers expected to travel long distances for work, they also may have to travel for training and personal reasons.

Visibility is a challenging issue in many ways for northern, rural social workers. Rural social workers are highly visible in small communities and have very little anonymity which makes going out and socializing difficult. For example, having a drink at a local bar may not be feasible for the rural social worker, and therefore they are going to urban locations outside of their community for social fun. For example, one participant stated, “when I started up here I asked my boss, I said what [do you do for fun around here] ...and she just told me I try to do a lot in [city named by participant] instead of here”. Consequently, rural social workers are encouraged by management to travel to attend social outings out of town, in more urban centers where they are not as visible.

Furthermore, if we consider travel and transportation it is important to note that every participant mentioned that their community was lacking in public transportation. Most communities did not have a local bus or taxi, although some did have access to Ontario Northland/Grey Hound Bus or Via Rail. Transportation was a major gap for participants in all communities; and, most notably, the research found that participants felt this was a gap for specialized services, such as medical appointments that often needed to be attended in a larger urban center for both themselves and their clients. Not all, but many of the clients of the social workers were individuals from a low-income background who could not afford public transportation out of town. In addition, the times of departure and arrival of the buses caused time management issues, since the individual would have to be out of town for a minimum of two days as the buses only departed once a day.

Also, two of the participants were from the same community and theirs had no local public transportation at all. Therefore, their clients must either drive themselves, or rely on family members or friends to bring them to their specialized appointments, which may also cause barriers to privacy when an individual must ask for rides for appointments with their social worker. Not all individuals have the means to pay for travel and, therefore, may not be getting the services they require. One participant mentioned that it could cost upwards of \$150 for a taxi ride of approximately one and a half hours or a one-way trip. Therefore, the study found that travel / transportation is a unique problem to rural areas and affects all individuals, not only professionals.

### **Independence**

Rural social workers are often part of small agencies with few employees, or they may be working completely on their own. For this reason, northeastern Ontario rural social workers are incredibly independent. Two of the four participants interviewed worked in a shared office space, but alone as part of their agency. They both discussed issues of isolation as they had no one on site to bounce ideas off. Most importantly, if these social workers took holidays or had to be away from the office their tasks were put on hold as there was no one available to replace them. Their clients are given a number for the out of town main office to contact. Both participants did mention that they had the ability to access co-workers, supervisors or managers by telephone or email, but stated that at times they missed the interpersonal connection. Furthermore, these two participants mentioned that they were part of a team from a larger agency located in an urban place and were at times forgotten. One participant shared that she must participate in monthly meetings by telephone and often felt left out, or as if something was missed. She stated,

I'm on the phone every month or so for the team meetings they're all laughing at the other end, they're having their Timbits and their coffee while [I'm] sitting in here, ah okay sounds funny but I can't hear half of what's going on so, technology hasn't helped much in that area.

Another participant mentioned that she lacked important training upon first being hired and was left on her own after only a few days. She found it difficult learning a new computerized system and ended up having to teach herself by making mistakes and learning from them. For example, while doing a home visit she was asked by a client if she would be checking the client's fridge and she explained,

Like if it's not a, there's not enough food in the home file, why am I checking a fridge? Maybe there's a reason behind it but it's never been brought up to me, [so] that's not something I do that's the way I self-taught myself because I was never taught to check fridges, so I don't do it am I supposed to? I don't know.

This study also found that participants agreed that there were many positive qualities to being in a rural community, away from their main office. Primarily they felt that they were given the freedom and were trusted to do their jobs. One participant stated, "I'm trusted to do my job and I love that, that I'm trusted to do my job, I do my job you know like I'm not second guessed, I'm not micro-managed". There was a sense of pride expressed by participants that they were trusted by supervisors and management and given the ability to make decisions. There were additional benefits of working alone, such as being able to set their own hours, arrive a few minutes late or leave a few minutes early without having to be accountable to others; not having anyone checking up on them, or having to hold their hands through projects.

Another important and surprising result from this study is that northeastern Ontario rural social workers who were interviewed were not bothered by a lack of a supervisor on site. First, the freedom to make decisions and be trusted to do their job meant they were more independent and self-reliant since they did not have the luxury of going to knock on their supervisor's door and have their questions answered. All participants had great experiences with their supervisors. Not all visited them locally, but some did so regularly. However, they all had good access to their supervisors, either by email or telephone. A cell phone was useful, as one participant mentioned that she had the ability to text her

supervisor, which is beneficial when this participant is travelling and needs to check in. In this situation the participant truly felt as though her supervisor cared about her and her well-being.

One participant described an incredibly different experience with a supervisor. This was an individual who was taking over a temporary position. The participant shared that she had very little training in the beginning and was left to fend for herself. She mentioned that during the first six months she had a supervisor who only provided supervision on one occasion. She described her first and only supervision session:

So I go in not knowing what supervision is, so I sit down and she goes okay we're going to open up your case load, your first file, okay what's going on, last time you seen the family, and I'm like....oh well I don't know uh last week or like something. And she goes okay well I need a date and I'm like oh I...I don't know. So she got mad at me that I didn't have notes or anything but I was never told what supervision was.

In addition, the participant stated that this supervisor left on vacation on two occasions: once for two weeks, and another for one week and did not inform the participant she was leaving. She stated,

she went away for two weeks, didn't tell me she was leaving, so the first two days I was trying to call her and couldn't get a hold of her called...the other supervisor that would normally cover when this supervisor was gone, and I said do you know where so and so are and she goes well yeah she's gone on vacation.

This is a stark contrast to the other participants who had no complaints about their supervisors and even enjoyed not having their supervisors on site.

## **Personal and Professional Experiences**

### **Challenges**

This research study explored the personal and professional experiences of northeastern Ontario rural social workers. Two themes emerged in this regard: first, that there are many challenges that rural social workers face; and second, that there are also many positive aspects to rural social work practice.

These challenges fall into two sub-categories: professional and personal. Throughout each interview many challenges were evident. To begin, the professional challenges faced by the rural social worker were potential conflicts of interest, the concept of “sink or swim” in terms of learning and balancing work and home life, and the impact of isolation. Each participant had their share of challenges. One participant who works primarily with Indigenous peoples dealt with many potential instances of conflicts of interest, when she was assigned several clients from the same family. At times the participant had difficulties keeping her stories straight, sometimes unsure which client told her what, since clients sometimes shared things about each other. Furthermore, the participants mentioned that clients don't have anonymity as the social workers may already know who they are or know some of their history, which in urban areas would be quite unlikely.

All the participants had issues with having to balance work and home life. Another participant stated,

So that was the biggest challenge I think, would be like navigating...my personal life with my professional because in a small town you're never off right, you're always on and it's like people come up and talk to you at the grocery store.

Since social workers are so much more visible in the rural environment, participants discussed having to maintain an image. They explained that their personal and professional images must be congruent, and that they are expected to practice what they teach to others. Pugh (2003) affirms this as he explains that lack of anonymity affects both rural social workers and service users, and that it has implications for how the rural social worker will “establish and maintain relationships with clients, conduct and comport themselves in their personal lives, and how they engage with the wider community” (p.75). Participants were also often in a position where they were alone in their office, or the only one that works in their position and, therefore, they must ensure the service is available, even if they may be putting themselves in a potentially unsafe situation by being alone with a client. It is the sink or swim effect, learning and doing the job versus failing and not being able to service the rural

community. One participant discussed feeling overwhelmed and overloaded at work, but also feeling that she just had to deal with it because there is no one else there who could do it. Lastly, in terms of professional challenges all participants explained how paramount it is to establish and maintain clear limits and boundaries with clients, as meetings in public and interconnections are unavoidable. Boundaries were also found to be important in relation to social media, such as Facebook, as clients had tried to add their social worker as a friend on Facebook.

The personal challenges northeastern Ontario social workers faces are real and extremely difficult. Every participant stated on several occasions that living and working as a social worker in a rural location means you have no anonymity, little privacy, social outings become restricted and that isolation and vulnerability are heightened. Participants found that since they were new in town it made them visible and they soon came to find that clients or community members knew who they were based on the lone fact that they were new in town. In addition, clients often knew where social workers lived or who they were dating. Participants mentioned that this could be unnerving at times since there did not seem to be much privacy. Participants even had to deal with clients being neighbours.

The social life that participants had in urban areas vastly changed when they relocated to a rural community. All participants explained that they felt strange, awkward or uncomfortable if they were to be in public casually drinking, as clients could potentially see them. For this reason, staying in rather than going out was often chosen by rural social workers. Again, the study found that rural social workers kept their social circles small; some did so by choice while others found it difficult to meet people and make new friends. One participant stated, “Working in the mental health field though it’s isolating right because literally everybody I’ve met I’m never going to be able to be friends with”. Many were friends with other like professionals in their community.

All participants mentioned having to discuss confidentiality issues with their clients as they were likely to see them in public on a regular basis. The study found that participants were approached in public places, such as the post office, a child's sporting event or the grocery store regarding their



appointments or other issues. Another participant stated, “I’ve been asked about grieving issues at the bread department at (local grocery store named by participant)”. Similarly, another participant mentioned “[be] cause that has happened where...I was at a hockey game and a client tapped me on the shoulder”.

The participants also seemed to feel a sense of vulnerability in that clients knew more about them than they would like, and that they must watch what they say and do and who they talk to. Along with this, Pugh (2007) mentions that clients seem to want to get to know more personal details about the lives of their social worker to place them in relation to others and their community. This is also where boundaries become paramount in rural social work. The sense of loss of anonymity also came in the form of community members or clients knowing their partner, or that they would have their vehicles recognized. This aspect came up again and again throughout the research study. However, it is important to acknowledge that although rural social workers find this difficult they also acknowledged many strengths and positive qualities of rural social work.

### **Strengths**

Although, as discussed above, there are my challenges to rural social work, there are also many positive qualities. The research found that the quality of care for rural social work was something you could not find in an urban location. The treatment / care that service users are receiving are above and beyond, client-centred and tailored to their needs. Rural social workers have more capacity to do a lot for their clients. For example, one participant stated,

I try to put everything I can into a file, whereas I'm going above and beyond and doing things maybe that [city named by participant] wouldn't do, because they don't really have the time and because maybe because their caseload is a little bit busier and they have other things to do, whereas here if I have a little bit of time, I'll go and do something that I don't necessarily have to do. Umm, an example, I moved one of my Crown wards to [city named by participant], that's not something I have to do but because he was moving to somewhere he didn't know, going to

school, his first apartment, I volunteered to do it, and it's just because I had that connection with him, that I just didn't feel comfortable just sending him off.

In addition, for most rural social workers there was no wait lists for services in their rural communities. Relationships with other major players in the community, such as police and family physicians were reported to be positive. A participant stated, “the community comes together I find, to just help and just provide this level of care that we may not get anywhere else”. They also mentioned being able to call the family physicians of their patients to discuss things such as medication, current symptoms and to create a care plan together. Three of the four participants also found that they had a great relationship with police. They were able to connect with police for assistance, and police had a good understanding of the services available and referred or brought people to these services when appropriate.

This study also found the following as positive qualities of rural social work. Since social workers were seen in public regularly they seemed to be more approachable, more human and more relatable. Although social workers maintain a certain level of professional authority, they were not seen as such authority figures and more as real people, living real lives with their own real families. A participant shared, “people they see me out, they see me as a human being, they see me with my husband and stuff right and they’re like ‘hi! That's my social worker’”. The study found that clients seemed to feel comfortable enough to acknowledge their social worker in public. Furthermore, a social worker visibly present in the community represents someone who is involved in their community, and a healthy member of society.

Another interesting finding in the research, about rural social workers who had relocated for work, was that their clients / service users appreciated that they didn’t already know everything about them. It allowed for fresh eyes, a fresh perspective and being able to tell their story without their worker already knowing their background.

Lastly, the major finding of this study is that although rural social workers are faced with unique challenges in rural locations, they also experience many positive attributes and strengths in terms of practising holistic, client-centred rural social work practice. The study found, overall, that rural social workers were creative and innovative and were allowed to be since they had more freedom to be themselves and make decisions for themselves and clients. The study found that rural social work has more benefits than negative consequences and allowed for a very enriching learning experience. Most participants were there by choice and one participant stated that they would choose rural over urban any day, which is quite a testament to the positive qualities a rural location has to offer.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the personal and professional experiences of a small sample of northeastern Ontario rural social workers. Using a qualitative approach and conducting interviews through a grounded theory lens, the study intended to explore rural social workers' personal and professional lives, including how these two intersect and interact. Furthermore, it was hoped to derive a theory or discussion on how to better prepare, educate and support northern rural social workers. The question I initially chose to explore was how do rural social workers experience rural social work practice? I also intended to explore the following sub-questions: a) how are rural social workers' lives negatively and/or positively affected by living and working in a rural community? b) How do rural social workers deal with out of office encounters with clients? And c) How can social workers be better prepared for relocation to rural community for employment opportunities? The answers appear to be multifaceted and participants seem to discuss their experiences as offering both challenges and opportunities.

This chapter will outline important points of discussion based on the findings, as well as discuss some of the implications, considerations, and recommendations of both the findings and the emerging theory as they relate to rural social work practice. The data from the research provided information that supports existing literature and provides new and perhaps even challenging information from what is available in current literature. This last chapter will similarly discuss the implications for social work education, implications for social work practice, the limitations of the study and the implications for future research.

#### **Social Workers are Unprepared for Rural Social Work Practice**

New graduates who relocate to a rural location feel unprepared for the complexities of living and working in a rural community. Schools of social work are not requiring students to take courses in rural social work practice, but rather allow students to choose such a course as an elective, when such an elective exists. Universities in Ontario providing social work education do not seem to be providing

any type of focus on rural social work unless an individual specifically seeks out these courses. In addition, some social workers have no intention of working in a rural community but end up in such a location for employment opportunities.

This is reflected by Bowles & Duncombe (2005), based on their work on rural and remote social work field education. Much of social work education is on theory and direct practice, with little attention paid to how geographic location impacts social workers' personal and professional lives.

Pugh (2003) also mentions that we must look at rural and urban as a continuum and not as a dichotomy. Practice in different geographic locations is interrelated and knowledge and training in both rural and urban would be necessary for the new social work graduate. Some individuals going through their post-secondary education do not plan on living and working in a rural location. However, due to limited employment opportunities some end up doing just so. This further emphasizes that some new graduates in the field of social work do not intentionally prepare for a career in a rural location.

In addition, new social workers might find rural social work particularly difficult. A study by Lonne and Cheers as cited in Mayer (2001) indicates that "50% of new workers only planned to stay less than 18 months" (p.92). Therefore, if a new graduate is to relocate to a rural community, away from their supports, such as family and friends they may have no intention to stay long-term. Furthermore, Lonne (1990), as cited in Mayer (2001), mentions that there are phases a social worker who relocates to a rural area goes through in order to make adaptations to their new environment. He notes that the process takes approximately 12-18 months and the phases include, "disorientation, honeymoon, grief and loss, withdrawal, depression and reorganisation and adjustment phases" (p.216).

If possible, it would be important to adequately prepare new rural social workers to rural life. This includes increased visibility and scrutiny of the personal lives of social workers, which is evident due to the interconnections of a rural community which is not as prominent in an urban community (Humble, Lewis, Scott & Herzog, 2013). All participants in this study recognized that their adjustment to rural social work was difficult. Each participant, especially those from urban cities, shared that rural

to urban life was a challenge and that they were not prepared for how difficult this transition would be. As a participant mentioned, hands-on experience and exposure to rural social work in the academic field is so important for the successful placement of rural social worker.

### **Investment in Community**

Being invested in one's community is not only important for the community but also to the individual's ability to adapt. For example, not being committed to the community may mean an individual does not get involved in social activities, which could leave the individual isolated, thereby reducing the opportunity for positive experiences in the community. In addition, this could diminish their overall level of subjective well-being, which is integral to life satisfaction, employment satisfaction and employee retention. Subjective well-being is a social scientific construct that identifies how individuals evaluate their own lives in terms of life satisfaction, mental health, including positive moods and emotions (Graham, Bradshaw, Surood & Kline, 2014). Subjective well-being also includes gaining satisfaction in a number of areas including, financial stability, enriching relationships, health and work. Graham & Shier (2010) also mention that other relationships that important for subjective well-being include being active in recreational sports, attending church and other social groups. This is deemed as important since individuals feel a sense of belonging and identity when part of groups.

In order to have successful placements in rural locations, rural social workers need to be committed to their employment, committed to their clients and committed to their communities. When one feels detached from these, subjective well-being is diminished; and therefore, the probability of a long-term placement becomes less likely. Bowles & Duncombe (2005) discuss how important it is to try and keep individuals who have demonstrated that “pre-existing commitment to rural life [since this] ensures more chance of retaining practitioners skilled in rural practice in rural areas” (p.287). To add, the different types of positions, such as permanent full-time versus temporary make a difference in the level of commitment to the individual.

### **Rural Social Workers as Generalist Practitioners**

Multiple roles, the generalist practitioner is evident in rural social work practice and evident in this study as the participants referred to themselves as jack of all trades and describe working on many levels. Rural social workers are expected to work within a wide range of practice modalities. This will vary from person to person, but to some extent rural social workers are stretching themselves to provide services. Some individuals may do several aspects of a job while others will be asked to work outside of their scope of practice. Rural social workers describe themselves as wearing many hats. This is mirrored in Mayor (2001) who studied five rural Australian social workers. Mayor states that “rural social work practice requires workers to be generalist and generic workers, multi-skilled and able to fulfill a variety of roles in the community” (p.91). Furthermore, rural social workers may also take on various professional roles including advocate, counsellor, crisis worker and case manager (Paulson & Casile, 2014). This is important since, once more, new graduates may be relocating to rural locations and may now face a greater responsibility in relation to their roles in the community. Their lack of experience will have to be compensated through continuing education and the support of clinical supervision.

### **Challenges and Enriching Experiences of Rural Social Workers**

The rural social workers in this study expressed many negative and positives experiences and the latter seemed to compensate for their negative experiences. Rural social workers must deal with scrutiny, lack of privacy, vulnerability, greater expectations from their services and limits in their own abilities to engage in personal self-care. Interestingly, the participants in this study identified that if they required services of their own, they may need to seek these services out of their own local community. Rural social workers are often in a position where they are the only ones offering such a service, or they may have a relationship with the service provider offering the service they require. Therefore, as one participant indicated, all services the community does not have are also services the rural social worker does not have, and more. Avenues of self-care could be limited as well. For

example, in terms of exercise, a gym or exercise classes may not be available. As the northeastern Ontario winters can be quite severe this can limit outdoor activities.

### **Rural Social Workers are Empowered to Work on their own**

More positively, rural social workers are trusted to do their job, are innovative, creative and enjoy being able to provide client-centred care. Rural social workers appreciate the freedom they are given to perform their duties. Rural social workers feel connected to their communities and have open relationships with primary stakeholders in the community, such as police and family physicians.

Interestingly some issues that were quite evident in the literature such as dual-relationships and major ethical dilemmas were not present in the interview findings. Quite contrary: when participants were asked about their issues with dual-relationships most stated they did encounter them. Much of the research discusses those issues of rural social work and dual-relationships as being unavoidable. However, in this sample it did not come through as a problematic area. Northeastern Ontario social workers are not experiencing another relationship outside of the therapeutic relationship with their clients for a number of reasons. Social workers are referring out, using other services, having up-front discussions with clients; and on a more negative note, are avoiding certain situations, such as public outings to avoid dual-relationships. Therefore, the findings suggest that dual-relationships may be avoidable, but possibly at a cost to the rural social worker who may socially isolate him or herself or avoid exploring their own self-care needs to maintain a professional boundary.

In addition, the literature review suggests that a lack of resources become a problem for many rural social workers; however, this did not manifest itself in this research study. Participants did discuss having to wear many hats and not always having a great connection with other services providers in the community, but a lack of resources or feeling as though they could not provide a good service was not evident.

Rural social work, although challenging, provides such an enriching experience to social workers. Rural social workers can face these challenges and work through them. They are committed



to their communities and essentially must learn to deal with some of the unpleasantness. Rural social workers demonstrate characteristics of independence, being trusted, freedom, innovation, creativity and acknowledge how important their position in the community is by what they bring to the community and how their services impact people directly. Furthermore, rural social workers gain a wide array of knowledge in a short period of time and gain experience quickly as they are forced to work under pressure within a variety of roles.

The theory that has emerged is that rural social work practice is a complex environment with both negative and positive characteristics. However, rural social workers can flourish in this environment with the right tools and training. Therefore, preparation prior to relocation to a rural community would likely increase the chances of a positive transition and greatly likelihood of retention of social workers in rural areas.

### **Implications for Social Work Education**

Social work practice is an important part of rural communities. It is integral to the well-being of individuals. Social work provides a wide array of services that help to prevent and manage mental illness and sustain mental health. Social workers are also advocates and voices of strength and service when individuals are in need. For this reason, it is so important to keep social workers in rural locations and help ensure positive placements in rural communities.

Rural social work is a reality for some new graduates who are seeking employment. For this reason, it may be appropriate to ensure that rural social work be made a priority and that students be provided with more opportunities for rural placement/practicum. It may also be important to ensure all social work students take a rural social work practice course, to provide students with at least a minimum base knowledge of rural social work practice. When introducing social work to students, it is important to focus on the generalist dimension of social work. To ensure that students are provided training in relation to all types of populations such as rural people, people experiencing homelessness

or immigrants for example. A wide range of knowledge provides a greater understanding for all social work practice situations.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

There are several implications that this study has in relation to social work and, most specifically, to rural social work practice. First, it is important to ensure individuals who demonstrate an interest in rural social work remain in rural communities, long-term. Ensuring long-term placements may come in the form of incentives by employers. Incentives may include competitive salaries, good benefits, a company vehicle, housing subsidies, and employment opportunities for partners, and loan forgiveness (Phillips, Quinn & Heitkamp, 2010).

As opposed to an urban city, rural social workers will likely have to learn to become accustomed to a loss of privacy and increased visibility by clients and community members. Rural social workers also need to be prepared and learn ways to deal with this circumstance in a professional and appropriate manner by respecting the confidentiality of clients and maintaining appropriate boundaries. Rural social work practice does not always end once the work day has been completed. Social workers will run into clients in their community after work and on weekends and may be approached about service related issues. Ethics and confidentiality can become blurred, thus making it imperative that the rural social work set clear limits and boundaries. This can be accomplished by acknowledging the client, however asking them to call during office hours or directing them to appropriate services if they are in crisis.

In addition, social workers may have conversations with service users at the commencement of services regarding out of office contacts. It is also important to ensure confidentiality by not disclosing personal information about clients outside of agencies, as well as refraining from acknowledging clients in the community unless they acknowledge the social worker first. Abiding by ethics, boundaries and confidentiality protocols protects the social worker and clients, and by doing so this helps to maintain positive therapeutic alliances with service users.

**Limitations of the Study**

Although it does not diminish its meaningfulness, the small number of participants limits the study. Therefore, a more in-depth study of social workers in all northeastern Ontario rural communities, including several participants from each area would be beneficial in strengthening its reliability and richness.

If the study had been of larger scale and included more participants, it could have warranted more researchers for interviews, transcribing, analysis and coding which could again provide more richness to the study. This study provides a small snapshot of a large geographical area; and, for this reason, I was restricted in terms of travelling to engage other participants.

Furthermore, the only forms of data collected were the literature review, interviews and member checking. Other forms of data collection, such as observation, through job shadowing and spending time with participants in their work and community environments, could have provided more depth as more sources of data would have been used. Due to the rural locations of some participants, observation was not possible due to issues with confidentiality. Rural social work practice is something important to me because of my work in a rural community, and it is through qualitative research and critical reflection that I explored this topic to help provide more knowledge on rural social work practice for future generations.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study found many aspects in common with other research pertaining to rural social work practice, such as the challenging experiences of the rural social worker. However, the study also touched on notions of rural social work that have not been fully explored. Supervision and rural social work would be an area to consider further research, as many rural social workers do not have supervisors on site and must often be supervised at a distance. Additionally, further research could be explored about what makes for resilient rural social workers. What makes for successful placements, and why do some rural social workers decide to leave, while others stay long-term?

### **Conclusion**

This study utilized a qualitative method to explore the personal and professional experiences of rural social workers in a section of northeastern Ontario. This study demonstrated that three of four participants relocated to rural communities from urban areas for employment opportunities. Regardless of whether social workers have previously resided in rural communities, they all expressed a level of not being prepared for how difficult living and working in a rural location would be. Put simply, rural social workers deal with complex issues that few urban social workers would ever face in their careers. Urban social workers would not likely deal with seeing clients everywhere they went in their communities. Urban social workers would likely not have to navigate relationships with clients outside of work because their children are friends. However, this is a reality for the northeastern Ontario rural social worker.

Participants all made recommendations and suggestions for individuals relocating to rural locations, which include being careful of what one says and does, maintaining a professional image of oneself, ensuring that there is congruence in how social workers portray themselves in and outside of work, and to know that privacy will be compromised. The significance of these issues varies between social workers: where some are very bothered by these issues and others are simply not bothered at all. However, it is important to note that rural social work is not strictly dichotomous from urban social work. Many social workers, either urban or rural, will encounter unpleasant situations with clients, in and outside of the office. Rural social work is further complicated by negative experiences since clients are neighbours, co-workers, and the cashier at the local grocery store or a friend of a friend. For this reason, it is so important to ensure that rural social workers are made aware of these complexities to aid in the transition to rural social work practice.

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### Appendix A

Table A1 is a demographic profile of potential communities to select participants from in the Northeastern Ontario region.

#### *Demographic profiles of communities in Northeastern Ontario*

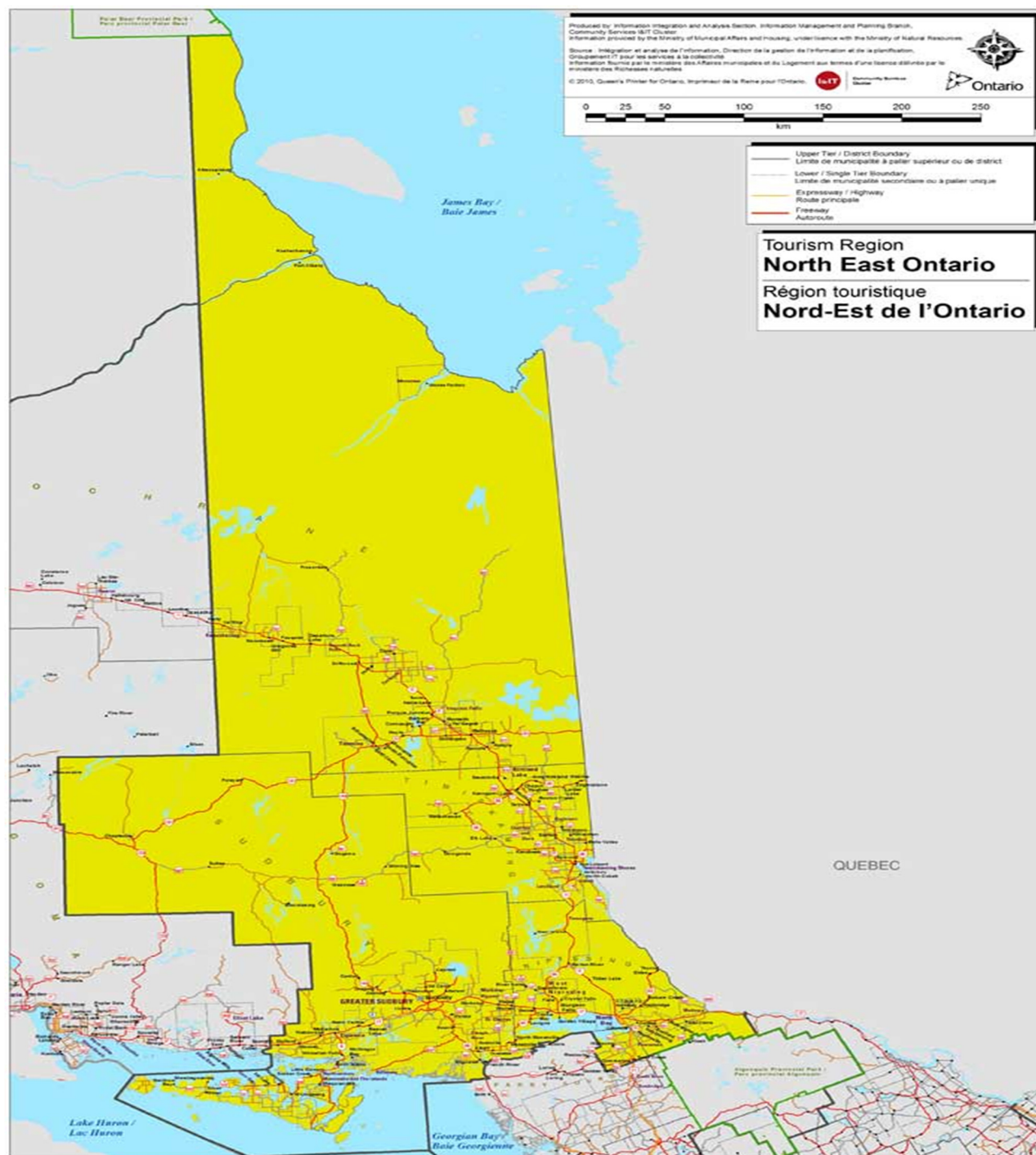
<b>Town</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Labour Force</b>
Chapleau	2,083	Boreal Forest and Arctic Watershed Region of Northern Ontario. Approximately 200km from Timmins	66.5% English only 33.1% French only	Employment rate 56.3% Unemployment rate 15.4 %
Hearst	5,090	Approximately 261km from Timmins	Francophone population is 86%	Lead employers -Forestry -Medical
Kapuskasing	8,654	Approximately 166.2km from Timmins	20.2% English only 7.8% French only 72.1% bilingual	Employment rate 54.55% Unemployment rate 7.52%
Wawa	2,975	Approximately 329.9km from Timmins	70.17% English only 1.25% French Only 28% Bilingual	-Lead employers -Manufacturing -Construction -Mining
Cochrane	5,340	Approximately 105.6km from Timmins	55.4% English Only 39.3% French only 52.3% Bilingual	Lead employers -Manufacturing -Retail trade -Health care
Iroquois Falls	4,595	Approximately 72.2km from Timmins		
Smooth Rock Falls	1,376	Approximately 104km from Timmins	17% English only 10% French only 73% Bilingual	Lead employers -Sales and service -Trades -Manufacturing

## Appendix B

Figure B1 is a map depicting the borders of Northeastern Ontario.

Figure B1

*Map of borders of Northeastern Ontario*



**Appendix C****Interview Protocol Form**

Name of interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: (street) \_\_\_\_\_ (town) \_\_\_\_\_ (province) \_\_\_\_\_

(Postal code) \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ DOB: \_\_\_\_\_ Male / Female: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_ Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Education: \_\_\_\_\_

How many years practicing: \_\_\_\_\_

How many years living in the community: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Place of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Town in which interview is taking place: \_\_\_\_\_

Instructions for interviewer:

- 1) Provide consent form to interviewee. Have them sign and give them a copy. ☐
- 2) Ensure your audio is turned on ☐
- 3) Have resources available for interviewee ☐
- 4) Provide personal contact information ☐

**Appendix D****Semi-structured questionnaire / First Interview Guide****Introduction:**

As previously discussed, the focus of this meeting today is to explore your experience as a social worker in your community. I will start by asking you some questions to gather some information. I will record the interview today if you are alright with that.

Do you have any questions or concerns about today's interview?

(The participant will be asked to sign the consent statement)

**Prompting interview questions:**

1. When did you first start working and living in this community?
2. What brought you to this community?
3. What have been your experiences of providing social work in your community?
4. Tell me about your negative and positive experiences in providing social work in your community?
5. What changes would you like to see?

**Appendix E****Research Information Letter**

Dear Sir/Madam:

Thank you for your interest in the research study on the impact of providing social work services in rural / small Northeastern Ontario communities. It is my hope that this research study will offer new insights into rural social work practice and the differences in providing social work in rural versus urban areas.

We would like to take this opportunity to tell you more about the study in question. Only a small number of participants are required and therefore it may not be possible to invite all individuals who are interested to participate in the interviews.

Enclosed you will find basic information about the intent and steps of the study.

For your information this study will be conducted by Venessa Hursley, who is a graduate social work student at Laurentian University. Should you have any questions please see the attached information (Venessa Hursley, Phone: 705-262-8242; e-mail: [vhursley@laurentian.ca](mailto:vhursley@laurentian.ca); Dr. Jan Yorke, phone: 1-855-675-1151, ext.6724; email: [jyorke@laurentian.ca](mailto:jyorke@laurentian.ca)).

This proposed research has been reviewed and approved by Laurentian University's Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of the project, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer, Laurentian University Research Office at 705-675-1151 ext. 3213 or ext. 2436 or toll free at 1-800-461-4030 or email [ethics@laurentian.ca](mailto:ethics@laurentian.ca).

Once again, your participation is voluntary. If you are interested in taking part in any aspect of this study, please read and sign the attached Informed Consent Statement and return it in the stamped, self-addressed envelope enclosed. Thank you for your interest.

Yours truly,

Venessa Hursley  
MSW Student/Researcher

## Appendix F

### **Informed Consent Statement**

You have been invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to evaluate your experience as an individual practicing social work in a small community in Northeastern Ontario. The researcher is a part-time graduate student in the Faculty of Social Work at Laurentian University.

### **Information**

If you are signing this Informed Consent Statement it is because you have agreed to participate in this study whereby you will be interviewed and audiotaped at a time and place we are discussed. At the initial meeting this informed consent statement will be reviewed. The audiotaped initial interview will proceed for approximately 60 to 90 minutes with a possibility of a follow-up interview at a later date and time. The initial interview will be semi-structured including an in-depth discussion about the experience of providing social work services in rural Northeastern Ontario communities. The interview will work with the interviewee to choose a location that is conducive to private and confidentiality for the interviewee.

Following the researcher's analysis of the interview(s) the interviewee will be asked to review and provide feedback on the researcher's interpretation of the data. This information will be provided to the interviewee either by way of mail or email accompanied by a telephone call to discuss feedback.

### **Risks**

Although the nature of the topic may not necessarily be trauma inducing there may be sensitive information shared, therefore every effort will be made to minimize discomfort or risk of upset as a consequence of the interview. The researcher will prepare each participant for the discussion by stating this and providing information regarding services should the interviewee have need of it.

### **Benefits**

The researcher hopes to gain insight into personal experiences of individuals practicing social work in rural Northeastern Ontario communities and how best to prepare individuals working in these environments in the future. It is hoped that social workers will be able to express their concerns and their views on how to change things, as well, to potentially affect theory and practice in rural social work practice since little research has been done in this specific geographical area.

### **Confidentiality**

All audio recordings and transcripts will be labeled with a number and pseudonym (fictitious name) so that the interviewee will not be identified. All information, including audiotapes, notes and transcripts will be stored in a locked and secured cabinet and will be promptly destroyed upon completion of the research study. A summary of the research results will be provided to the interviewee upon its completion. The results from the research will be published as a graduate thesis. No identifying information will be disclosed in the graduate thesis. The researcher, Venessa Hursley, the thesis advisors Dr. Janet Yorke and Dr. Karen McCauley will have access to the raw information.





### **Limits of confidentiality**

As mentioned above all information will be completely confidential and no identifying information about the interviewee will be provided without the interviewees informed, voluntary, and written consent except as outlined below:

When the interviewer is required by law to disclose what would otherwise be confidential information, such as when the interviewer believes the interviewee may pose a risk of serious injury to themselves or others, if there is suspicion of child abuse as defined by provincial legislation or the duties of reporting through the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers in cases such as inappropriate dual-relationships for example.

### **Contact**

If you have any questions at any time about any aspect of the study you may contact the researcher, Venessa Hursley at 705-262-8242. This research study has been reviewed and approved by Laurentian University's Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of the project, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer, Laurentian University Research Office at 705-675-1151 ext. 3213 or ext. 2436 or toll free at 1-800-461-4030 or email [ethics@laurentian.ca](mailto:ethics@laurentian.ca).

### **Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may decline to participate at any point during the interview and afterwards. If you withdraw from the research study your information will be destroyed. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time. In addition, by consenting to participate you do not wave any of your legal rights.

### **Consent**

I have read, or had this statement read to me, and acknowledge its conditions and that I understand the above information.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to take part in the first audiotaped interview which includes a 60-90 minutes semi-structured interview. I have received a copy of this form.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to take part in the second audiotaped interview which includes a follow-up interview from the first interview.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



Researcher signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to receive a summary of the study's final results

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If so, please include mailing address:

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**Figure 1**

Diagram – Primary themes of experiences of rural social workers in Northeastern Ontario

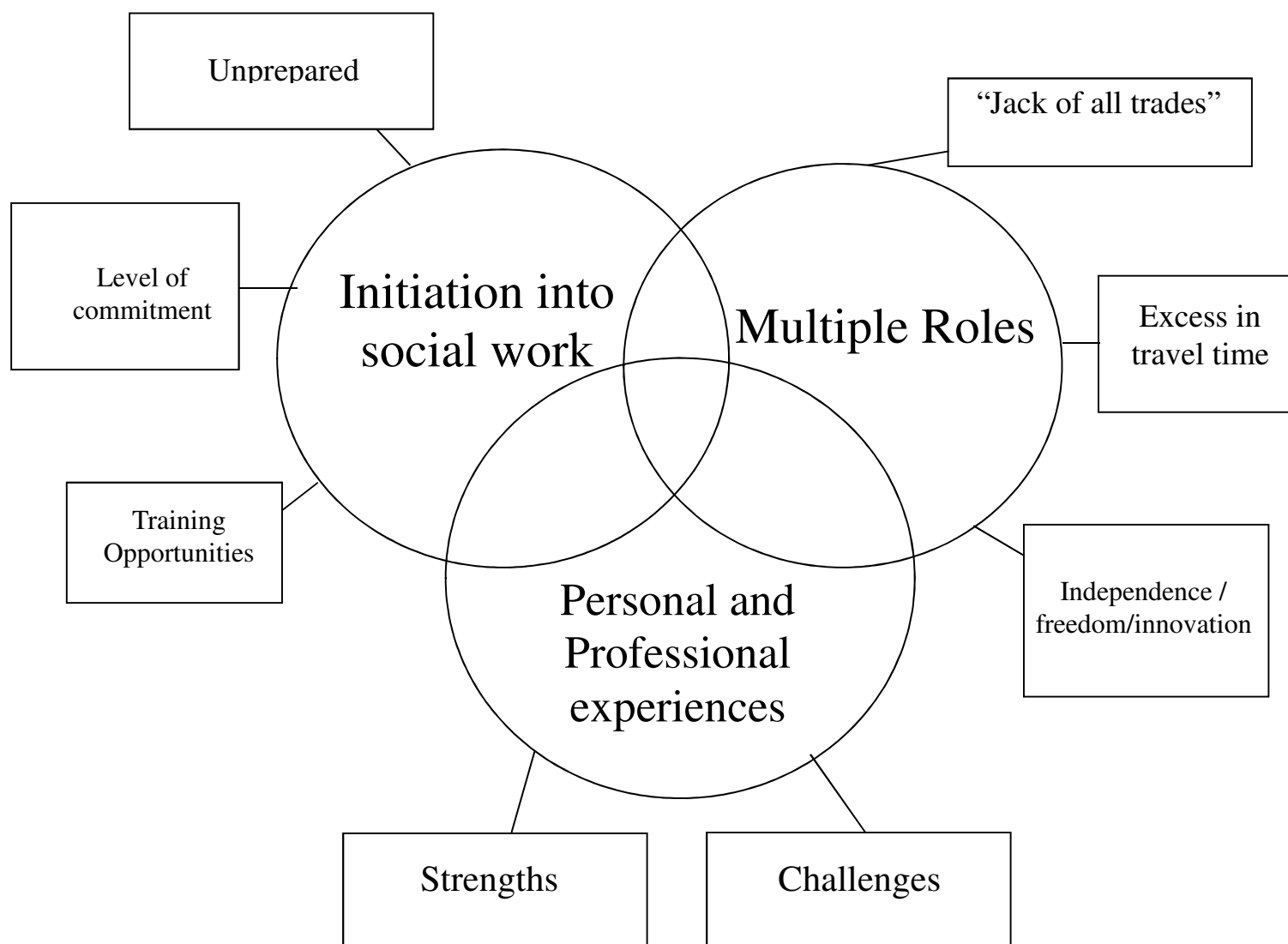


Figure 2

Diagram – Initial themes

